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Justice Dept. to Probe Any U.S. Links to Barbie

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WASHINGTON—The Justice Department said Monday that it will undertake a comprehensive investigation into allegations that Klaus Barbie, a notorious World War II Nazi, had close ties to the U.S. intelligence community after the war and may have been assisted by American officials in escaping to South America from France.

Declaring that it views the charges with "deep concern," the department said in a statement that a preliminary review of government files showed that the allegations have "sufficient merit to warrant a comprehensive investigation."

Some Justice Department officials, referring to the case as "ancient history," have been lukewarm

to a Barbie inquiry, since controversy surfaced a month ago over his role as a postwar informant for U.S. intelligence analysts in Europe.

However, two congressional committees, as well as prominent U.S. Jewish leaders, have expressed interest in uncovering Barbie's American connection, and it is understood that the Justice Department's decision represents a recognition by Reagan Administration officials that action should be taken.

Known as "the butcher of Lyon" during the war, Barbie was extradited to France from Bolivia early in February and is scheduled to stand trial for eight cases of "crimes against humanity." Barbie, who was the Gestapo chief in Lyon, has been accused of ordering 7,591 Jews deported to concentration camps and of executing 4,000 other French Jews and resistance fighters during World War II.

Administration sources who requested anonymity said that Secretary of State George P. Shultz and Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger recently persuaded the White House that a serious inquiry should be undertaken into Barbie's American links. To avoid damaging U.S. relations with France, Shultz reportedly argued that Justice, not State, should head the investigation, the sources said.

The same sources said the Justice Department has not yet secured a firm commitment of cooperation from the National Security Council and other intelligence agencies to give investigators access to highly classified material that has remained secret for years.

Study by Congress

The Senate Intelligence Committee and the House Judiciary Committee's subcommittee on immigration have been studying the Barbie case in light of earlier evidence that U.S. intelligence officials helped former Nazis in German-occupied Soviet Byelorussia reach the United States after the war.

Erhard Dabringhaus, a university professor in Detroit and a former U.S. counterintelligence officer, has said he paid Barbie \$1,700 a month after the war and kept his hiding place secret from French officials who were searching for him. Dabringhaus said Barbie gave U.S. agents valuable information about the Soviet Union.

Dabringhaus said that he knew of no U.S. policy to protect former Nazis but that his superiors ordered him to shield Barbie.

Barbie, now 69, underwent emergency hernia surgery a week ago after becoming ill in his cell in Lyon. Family members said Barbie is also suffering from polyneuritis, a nervous system disorder.